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WHA FOR JASON MACK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/09/2017
TAGS: [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SNAR](#) [XK](#)
SUBJECT: COSTA RICA FOILS COLOMBIAN CARTEL ASSASSINATION
PLAN

Classified By: CDA DHENIFIN For Reason 1.4 (d)

11. (S) SUMMARY. In late June, the GOCR foiled a plan by traffickers linked to the Colombian Norte del Valle cartel to assassinate Minister of Public Security Fernando Berrocal, apparently in retaliation for the recent (and notable) counternarcotics successes of the Arias administration. Elements of the national intelligence service (DIS), the Drug Control Police (PCD), the Judicial Police (OIJ), the Special Immigration Police, and the regular police (Fuerza Publica) combined forces to break up the plot. Despite GOCR public statements suggesting that other cabinet-level officials were also at risk, Berrocal was the real target, with some lower-level police officials also in the cross hairs. A down payment of USD 50,000 had been paid to the hit men, who were to receive an additional USD 100,000 upon success. Five Colombian citizens --the supposed hitmen -- were deported to Bogota on June 30, but released shortly after arriving in Colombia since they had technically broken no law in either country. We hope this near-miss will be a wake-up call to re-energize GOCR efforts to build a more effective domestic security as part of a coordinated national domestic security strategy. END SUMMARY.

GOCR ACTION =====

12. (U) Since the start of the Arias administration in May 2006, over 45.5 metric tons of narcotics have been seized in unilateral GOCR or joint US-Costa Rican actions in Costa Rican territory. This underscores the success of the Arias administration's anti-drug efforts, its commitment to combat drug trafficking, but also the magnitude of the problem. Additionally, large amounts of currency (over one million USD since 2005), marijuana, and Ecstasy pills have been seized. According to Vice-Minister of Public Security Rafael Gutierrez, 52 Colombian citizens have been arrested in the past year for those and other crimes.

TRAFFICKER REACTION =====

13. (S) The GOCR's efforts, in particular the seizure of two Central Valley caches totaling over 4 mts, apparently had a significant enough impact on a Choco-based operation linked to the Norte de Valle cartel to prompt a reaction. A five-member hit team was dispatched to Costa Rica, with plans to also send a larger surveillance team. Minister Berrocal

was the only confirmed cabinet-level target, although the media mentioned Minister of the Presidency (and the president's brother Rodrigo Arias as a target. (Of note, Attorney General Francisco Dallanese erroneously insisted to the media that he, too, had been targeted.) The hitmen were also reportedly gunning for key vice ministerial-level figures, according to Public Security Minister Berrocal.

GOCR RESPONSE

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¶4. (S) Tipped off by intelligence information, key elements of the national intelligence service (DIS), the drug control police (PCD), the judicial police (OIJ), the immigration police, and the regular police (Fuerza Publica) broke up the plot. A US-vetted DIS unit played the leading role. Three Colombians were arrested on June 28 in Alajuela, with two more in Esparza on June 29. Of the initial three arrestees, who had been in the country for up to one year, two had married local prostitutes in an attempt to legalize their immigration status (a common practice in Costa Rica). Their marriages were not yet recorded, however, affording them no special immigration status. The third subject had applied for political asylum, which was denied. The other two arrestees had been in the country for just a few weeks.

¶5. (C) The five Colombians were held on public security and immigration charges, then deported on June 30, in careful coordination with the GOC. Because the deportations were based primarily on intelligence and not law enforcement information, and because there were no charges or warrants against the five in Colombia, they were released on July 1. On July 2, Berrocal issued a statement which respected the GOC decision and added that on-going investigations continued in both countries. Vice Minister Gutierrez added that the GOCR could not charge the Colombians "because we

only had indications that they were going to do something." Privately, GOCR authorities are satisfied that the detentions and deportations have stopped the assassination plot, despite the quick release in Colombia.

WHY BERROCAL?

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¶6. (C) In addition to the GOCR's counter-drug cooperation and successes (which continue this week against two go-fast boats off Costa Rica's Pacific Coast), we assess that Berrocal was targeted for three reasons. First, the traffickers probably considered any Costa Rican official to be a relatively soft target, certainly by Colombian standards. Second, Berrocal was the logical choice, given his ministerial portfolio and his public role touting Costa Rica's CN successes. Third, the traffickers needed to send a message to the GOCR, their presumably compromised network in Costa Rica, and their customers and suppliers in the region that they remained in business, despite the recent setbacks. A successful attack against Berrocal would have had a serious (and negative) impact on GOCR CN efforts, in our view. Now that this plot has been broken up and made public (and Berrocal's personal security appropriately improved), we expect the traffickers to turn their attention back to business as usual, at least for now.

COMMENT

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¶7. (S) The Good News: Judging by the GOCR's cartel "enemies," Costa Rica's CN efforts are making a difference. Indeed, from our point of view, the GOCR continues to offer a lot of counter-drug bang for just a few bucks. Furthermore, in his press comments, Berrocal clearly described the threat to Costa Rica from international trafficking, in sharp contrast to some of his comments after taking office last year suggesting that local crime, and not the "US-fueled" flow of drugs, was a more serious issue in Costa Rica. The increased seizures demonstrate not only better law enforcement efforts but increased cooperation between intelligence units and the police. The Bad News: We can't remember such a bold cabinet-level assassination plot by narcos in the past in Costa Rica. The drug game may be

changing here, and not for the better. We hope this near-miss will be a wake-up call to the GOCR to re-energize efforts to build a better-trained, better-equipped and more effective domestic security apparatus, within the framework of coordinated national domestic security strategy.

HENIFIN